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New Directions in Australian Aboriginal Fabric Printing

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1. Introduction

There is great diversity of culture in Aboriginal Australia. One example of this is the number of original language groups, 250 at the time of first settlement. One hundred and sixty are now extinct and only twenty are expected to survive (Walsh, 1993). Some traditional craft practices such as basketry face an equally depressing survival rate however fabric printing is showing strong signs of survival in the art market that has been dominated for decades by bark painting and more recently by acrylic painting on canvas. Fabric printing is a well-known technique in the western world but for the Indigenous people of Australia it is a recent addition to their traditional art practices such as string and basket making. This paper provides some of the history of the practice, its problems, potentials and recent successes.

Figure 1 – Range of Babbarra fabrics at the Darwin Art Fair, 2014. Photo: L.Hamby

2. Historical Background

Cloth was first introduced in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory by Macassan traders three to four hundred years ago. They came to collect trepang or bêche-de-mer and traded a range of

goods for the services of Aboriginal people. Cloth and sarongs were amongst these trade goods. Early documentation of the presence of cloth comes through rock art images of figures possibly wearing sarongs of patterned fabric. Donald Thomson, an anthropologist working in Arnhem Land in the late 1930s wrote about the value of items that were part of the ceremonial exchange system not only with Macassans but with other people in Arnhem Land. To materials such as calico, blankets, string and later wool, he applied the collective term mäthäkäl (Thomson, 1949, p. 86). The current spelling of the word is now mardhakal and it refers to clothes, things, possessions. Cloth came in pieces, yardage (Knaap & Sutherland, 2004, p. 241) and as sarongs to Arnhem Land. Ganter records instances in memory of Aboriginal people in which sarongs were presented as gifts (Ganter, 2006, pp. 42–43). Some early anthropologists, such as Baldwin Spencer, originally misinterpreted the use of fabric in items of material culture like baskets as a degradation of culture, as not being traditional or authentic (Spencer, 1928, p. 831). However this was not and is not the situation in more recent times. When Nicolas Peterson was working at Mirrnatja in the 1960s cloth was a valuable commodity. Peterson noted that people hoarded cloth as a form of wealth in long rolls of 8-15 yards (Peterson, 1971, p. 75). Cloth has been a highly valued material in Arnhem Land society and is used in ceremony and has been incorporated in other objects such as conical mats and baskets (Hamby, 2009, pp. 493–494).

The first western textile techniques were introduced to Aboriginal people by missionaries, teachers and art advisers to encourage productive work and money earning capacity. Spinning, weaving, dressmaking and crafts were taught from the 1930s with a flourishing of creativity in the 1970s, the heyday of the craft movement in Australia. In Arnhem Land fabric printing predated the introduction in the 1970s and 80s of printmaking on paper; women and students were taught fabric printing at the local school in Yirrkala by the non-Indigenous staff long before artists worked on paper (Salvestro, 2002).

Lino-block and screen printing have been used by Aboriginal communities since the 1970s, particularly on Bathurst Island and at Gunbalanya. Artists like Diana Wood Conroy pioneered repeat pattern screen printing with Tiwi Designs on Bathurst Island, NT in the 1970s. A key figure in the early move to fabric was facilitator, screen printer and teacher Ray Young, who worked on Bathurst Island for 10 years from 1979 (Callaghan & McMahon, 2009) and then at Gunbalanya in 1987 where Wendy Kennedy had earlier initiated fabric printing through a Duke of Edinburgh Award (May, 2005, p. 189).

Also on Bathurst Island at Nguiu, a women's centre has been operating since 1969. Bima Wear was established with the assistance of Sister Eucharia from Bathurst Island Catholic Mission (Bima Wear, 2014). The centre has always been a not for profit organization for the women to print fabric and make clothing for their own use in the community. They now have an outlet and a website. Bima Wear makes the clothing that the local Tiwi Women's Choir Ngarukuruwala wears for their performances. Some Indigenous artists like Lenore Dembski from Paperbark Woman in Darwin used Bima Wear fabrics in their garments.

During the 1980s Leading Australian fashion designers Linda Jackson and Jenny Kee promoted Indigenous craft and design working with Aboriginal batik and block or screen-printed fabrics in fashion and accessories. Robyn Healy described the enormous impact of the 1983 exhibition of Tiwi Designs' curated by Ace Bourke in Sydney. Ace invited Robert Burton, Jenny Kee, Linda Jackson and Colette St John to select Aboriginal fabrics that were printed and then made into fashion garments (Ryan & Healy, 1998, p. 59). Bronwyn Bancroft, a Banjulung woman ran 'Designer Aboriginals" in Rozelle, Sydney from 1985 -

1990. In 1987 she showed her work with four other Koori designers at Au Printemps department store, in Paris (Cochrane, 1992, p. 330). At Ernabella, SA, screen printer Marie Warren, trained by Ollie Henstridge, printed fabrics designed by other artists at Ernabella in the 1990s (Eickelkamp, Ute, 1999, p. 48). Painter Jimmy Pike (1940-2002) with Desert Designs (launched in 1985) is known for the flamboyant printed fabrics capturing the essence of Australian landscape, sold by the metre and as boutique fashion clothing. Pike's work was celebrated in the exhibition "Desert Psychadelic" which was shown in China in 2011 as part of the "Imagining Australia" program.

In 1993 the exhibition, "Lizards, Snakes and Cattledogs - Contemporary Australian Textiles" brought more attention to Australian fabric printing including works from Tiwi Designs, Jilamara Arts and Crafts, Ernabella Arts Incorporated, Injalak Arts and Crafts and Daluk Daluk Arts (Reptilia, 1993). The exhibition, "The Fabric of Australian Society" presented by the Melbourne Olympic Candidature in 1996 included printed fabrics by Indigenous artists Bronwyn Bancroft, Tara Munkanome, Jilamara Arts and Crafts and Tiwi Design (Melbourne Olympic Candidature, 1996). This background provides a window into the early history of Indigenous fabric printing in Australia. The last decade however has seen a resurgence of interest in fabrics and the number of communities that have expanded or started printing has increased. Amongst the positive aspects of having growing interest and new Aboriginal designed and printed fabrics there are problems and issues that have become more apparent.

3. Issues of Concern for Indigenous Fabric Artists

In Australia Aboriginal fibre works and fabric have not been at the forefront of research and exhibition and only in the past two decades have obtained status in the art world. Painting, whether on bark or canvas, holds the premier position. Printed fabrics are not only new in the market but they are an introduced technique. There are many issues that arise from this fact alone but other problems are associated with the technical aspects of printing, the positioning of printed fabrics in the art market and in their communities and the economics of fabric printing. In this paper the topics of authenticity and its related area of cultural valuing will be examined with funding issues for fabric support.

3.1 Authenticity and the Hand-Made

Since the early days of anthropological collecting in Australia there has been a concern that items being gathered were to be of an 'authentic' nature (Spencer, 1928, p. 848). There have been a few attempts in Australia to establish a label of authenticity that have not come to fruition but there is a desire from buyers to know that the product they are buying is what it purports to be. With fabrics the authenticity has been seen to be connected to the production of the fabrics and their attribution to individual artists.

Figure 2 – Florence Gutchen and her printed fabric. Cairns. 2011. Photo: L. Hamby

Since the 1970s the beginning of production of Indigenous Australian fabrics the processes have all been completed by hand in small workshops and on remote communities. There has

not been a question about their authenticity. James Bennett, curator at the Art Gallery of South Australia stated 'It is the direct contact between the artist's hand and the medium which has been such a distinctive feature of Aboriginal screen-printing' (Bennett, 1998). There is growing awareness of hand-printed work as the public is more interested in 'making' as a reaction to mass manufactured and digital products. Fabric printing by its repetitive nature challenges the concept of a unique item. The conflicting values of hand-made versus commercial digital works adds to the confusion within the arena of already complex attitudes towards what constitutes an authentic Aboriginal art product. There is a growing demand for large quantities of Aboriginal printed fabric for the fashion, interior, craft and tourist product markets, which cannot be met by the slow methods of hand printing in remote arts centres. One solution is to outsource the printing. Some artists and art centres commission Mark Cawood, owner of Publisher Textiles and Papers in Sydney, to hand screen print on their 20 metre tables. Publisher currently prints fabrics for Babbarra Women's Centre in Maningrida and Lucy Simpson of Gaawaa Miyay. The fact that the printing itself is not done by Aboriginal people casts a shadow for some on its authenticity.

Digital printing presents another level of complication in the authenticity issue in that a machine completes the actual printing. For some the artistic qualities such as variation in colour and texture found in hand printing are absent. However some groups are involved with digital printing. The Travelling with Yarns, Forum & Workshop Series, 22nd – 25th August 2012, was an exciting event focused primarily on the remote printed textile industry, innitiated by master printer, Tim Growcott.

Figure 3. Tim Growcott with trial digital fabric print at Travelling with Yarns, 2011. Photo: L. Hamby

The Forum was convened by Hamby and brought together Indigenous artists and experts in textiles, fashion, art and technology. One objective of the symposium was to discuss digital printing. Valerie Kirk facilated this by having some of the lino-block prints from Babbarra Women's Centre printed by Spoonflower in North Carolina. Tim Growcott collaborated with some of the artists at Injalak Arts and Crafts to try new effects for the group. He worked with Penny McIntyre at Think Positive in Sydney to produce a combination of Injalak artists'

designs with photographic backgrounds (Association of Northern Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists, 2013, p. 40). Other groups have tried digital printing with bureaus in Sydney and Melbourne. High-end digital printing has proved to be very costly for individuals and cash strapped art centres. Some of the best work using digital prints has been produced through collaborations with individuals or commercial partners. Two of these are discussed in the success section of the paper involving interiors with Koskela design and Durrmu Arts Centre and fashion with Erub Erwer Meta on Darnley Island in the Torres Strait.

Digital printing can be, depending on the circumstances, an efficient and cost effective means of producing printed fabric. Conflicting views come into play when the designs are Indigenous ones particularly when the work has been produced by hand for a long time. The case study that follows illustrates both the authenticity issues and problems of funding.

3.1.1 Babbarra Design and Spotlight

Babbarra Women's Centre began in 1983 as a women's refuge but is now a centre that has at its focus employment and training opportunities for women. One of its enterprises is the textiles workshop, Babbarra Designs which started in 1989. Lino-block printing is very accessible and proved to be very popular. It is not highly technical and artists can work at their own pace, taking breaks regularly. With lino-printing there is scope for design flexibility: changing colour combinations spontaneously on the one fabric, hand painting back into designs and applying multiple layers of colour. This work is slower than screen printing, but many fabric artists prefer the more manageable and less physically demanding form of lino-printing. This has meant that only small amounts of fabric have been produced and now there is a surge in popularity and demand for the fabrics. The small supply of fabrics has been sold directly from arts centre outlets to local people and passing trade, provided for local commissions like park ranger uniforms and curtains for new housing and through art fairs and a small number of gallery shops.

Figure 4 – Valerie Kirk and Helen Lanyinwanga at Babbarra Designs, Maningrida. 2011. Photo: L. Hamby

Claire Nicholl, Babbarra Women's Centre Manager, came to the Travelling with Yarns Symposium and brought two of the artists with her. The discussion there on digital printing with the samples printed by Spoonflower became the basis of Babbarra's partnership with the Australian retail giant, Spotlight. Spotlight is a family owned business that specializes in fabrics, craft and homewares. In 2011 it had already engaged with Babbarra with its Stitch in Time program that worked with women in communities to help them earn money through their sewing. They provided six sewing machines and an overlocker to Babbarra (Spotlight, 2011, p. 68). In 2013 Babbarra Design partnered with Spotlight to produce the Maningrida Fabric Collection of commercially printed fabrics for the home sewing market. Each artist has their name and the title of the design printed on the selvedge of the fabric and the paper ticket attached to the roll. Tim Hanrahan from Spotlight explained that 10% of all orders goes to Babbarra. In the first 6 months of their contract $40-60000 went back to the community (Arnost, 2014).

The project with Spotlight is a contradictory one in terms of its results. Babbarra have made money from the exercise and are now able to use the Spotlight fabric themselves to make clothing which they sell and wear themselves for events like the Darwin Art Fair. However, this venture has compromised the integrity of the Babbarra fabrics with other customers. Nomad Art no longer sells Babbarra fabrics. Collectors who had paid significant amounts, $90 per metre for the original hand block printed fabrics were confused that the same designs or similar are now being sold in retail fabric shops for $20 per metre. Equally boutique clothing store Raw Cloth no longer buy their fabrics as they can not justify the cost of their product using the hand-printed fabric to their clients who see Babbarra fabrics at Spotlight (Horgan, 2014).

Figure 5- Rolls of fabric printed in China from original lino-block prints produced by women at Babbara Designs for Spotlight. 2014. Photo:V. Kirk

Confusion has been created around the value of this printed cloth. Its authenticity is brought into question. The Spotlight cloth is not hand-made and does not come from the community workshop. Tim Hanrahan from Spotlight has said this about the cloth: 'It truly is like a piece of art. When you're buying it, it is completely authentic, it's original - it's like having an art gallery in your house or wearing it (Arnost, 2014).' Despite his statement there are others who see this as a devaluing of the lino-prints from Babbarra (Horgan, 2014) and other community art centres view this as an undermining of the value because the printing is not actually completed in the community and is not done by hand. Lizz Bott, the CEO of Merrepen Aboriginal Corporation is of this opinion.

I personally myself wouldn't have gone that way because I think what makes the textiles so special is that they're printed in the community by the artists or by staff at the art centre. It's an ethically produced product and I just think having them digitally printed takes away from that. (Arnost, 2014)
Merrepen Arts Centre is located in Nauiyu, 220 kilometres south-west of Darwin, Daly River Northern Territory. The various works produced at his centre are painting and fibre objects but the main production is their hand-screen-printed fabric.

3.2 Funding Issues

This time of increased demand for fabrics and producers working towards diversifying production methods to produce more fabric, the industry faces its biggest challenge ever - funding. From the case study discussed the problems of production are linked to both economic and cultural values. The majority of Indigenous printed fabric in Australia comes from art centres in the Northern Territory and Queensland. Since 1991 The Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support (IVAIS) is the primary source of funding to art centres and according to the agency, they are 'building capacity, maintaining and transmitting culture and generating income and employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists (Ministry for the Arts, 2014).' It provides approximately $11 million annually to assist Indigenous artists. The department can have profound effects on the communities it supports through their funding.

For example three-year funding was not granted in November 2013 to Merrepen Arts, Injalak Arts and Crafts and Elcho Island Arts Centre. This funding had previously been promised to the centres (Fyles, 2013; Harrison, 2013). Without this federal support these centres would be forced to close. This was unfortunate timing for all concerned but the situation was most publically expressed by Merrepen Arts.

The centre was celebrating after a winat the Melbourne Cup, a yearly horse race in Melbourne, when the news about the funding came to them. Their win however was not a horse but the top prize in the prestigious Fashion's on the Field event. A fabric designed by one of Merrepen's artists, Marita Sambono, was used in a dress designed and made by Raw Cloth and worn by model Chloe Moo who won the prize. This news made the national headlines as not only a fashion model was wearing their fabrics but politicians, Indigenous Senator Nova Peris and Natasha Griggs, federal minister for Solomon wore Aboriginal printed fabrics for the opening of Parliament. There was considerable outrage by supporters including the MP Griggs at the retraction of funding. They lobbied the government to re-instate the funding which was restored for the first year for all centres.

In communities there is limited employment and Merrepen Arts supports one-third of the community through their fabric printing and other art work. Artist are employed to work at the centre to do their work from designing to printing. The fabric retails for up to $150 AUD a metre. In addition to their wages the artist receive a commission. Lizz Bott explained the system on an ABC television program.
The artists actually receive 20 per cent commission from every metre of fabric that's sold. The reason why they receive a smaller commission than the arts centre is that we outlay all the high costs as in paying for the workshops, all the materials, the fabrics, the paints, the screens, all those sort of things. (Arnost, 2014)
Despite this approach and success in selling their fabric the Art Centre still needs governmental support. It also needs support from the market; an opinion expressed directly by MP Natasha Griggs. 'The best thing that I could do for these art centres is to proudly support them by buying their products and encouraging other people to do exactly the same (Arnost, 2014). Griggs also hopes to establish an international reputation for the fabrics. During the 2014 royal tour of Australia by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge Griggs presented the couple with a selection of Merrepen fabrics.

Whether or not supporting art and craft activities should be a role of the government is an issue followed by other people besides Australians. Littrell and Dickson in their book provided valuable information about craft/art development. 'Yet because of its image as a "soft" or frivolous industry, some politicians and development professionals question whether the handcraft sector is worthy of investment. An opposing view holds that the creation of sustainable employment opportunities for poor people and a positive alternative to mass production outweighs the costs ("Amazon," n.d.).' For Aboriginal people economics and cultural value are often twined together. Jon Altman, leading anthropologist on Aboriginal economic policy, presented these ideas last year at a conference.

From an Aboriginal perspective, the production of art did not just reflect economic imperatives, although livelihood was and is of crucial importance; it was and is as much about identity making and political representation—the politics of land rights and place; personal identity and personhood. (Altman, 2013)

3.3 Fabric as a valued cultural product

In the past 50 years, community shops have sold printed fabrics to local people and tourists as craft and utilitarian products. Some fabric has been commissioned for particular purposes within communities such as curtains for new community housing and uniforms for park rangers at Maningrida, NT. Other shops have also sold limited amounts of fabric to the public.

Indigenous people have valued cloth for particular ceremonial purposes. James Bennett documents the use of Tiwi printed fabric in mortuary ceremonies (1998:26) and Morphy notes painted shrouds being used to wrap the body for burial (personal communication). In 2012 a famous Aboriginal artist from Yirrkala, Gulumbu Yunipingu, died. As part of her elaborate funeral services a funeral cloth was printed at Megalo Access Arts (Eccles, 2012).

However, the Indigenous printed fabric in Australia has not been valued as cultural product/art by the galleries, collectors or wider community. There have not been many curated exhibitions in major institutions or publications focusing on the fabrics but there is recent growing interest and inclusion. Part of this interest in fabrics has been demonstrated by sales at the Indigenous Art Fairs in Darwin and Cairns and at Selling Yarns 1, 2 and 3. Nomad Art in Darwin have held several exhibitions in the past two years including in 2014, Karritypul, a solo exhibition of Merrepen artist Kieren Karritypul's paintings, prints on paper and fabrics.

Valerie Kirk has curated two exhibitions. In 2011 Australian Indigenous Printed Fabrics was presented in Xalapa, Mexico, as part of the World Textile Organisation conference program. Telling Stories on Fabric showcased fabrics from Babbarra Design, Maningrida, depicting narratives of landscape, bush foods, craft and dreaming stories, reflecting the artists' language and cultural groups.

Contemporary Sydney based artist, Lucy Simpson, a Yuwaalaraay woman from northwest NSW has helped to raise awareness of fabric as a cultural product. She trained at the College of Fine Arts where she formulated the ideas for her design and fabric printing business "Gaawaa Miyay (literally meaning river daughter). She says: "Design is my life and I love it. My culture makes me proud and it enriches my soul to be able to breathe life into old stories, practice ancient traditions, and create a new style of cultural expression through visual storytelling. In this way I am forever learning, creating and sharing, and immersing myself in family, country and story - nothing in the world makes me happier". http://www.gaawaamiyay.com/#!about/cjg9 Her prints use a palette of Australian earth colours – muddy brown/greens of the rivers, black of the soil and the distinctive red of the sandy soil .The designs are refined abstractions from natural elements such as the river, birds, the stars in the milky way, but often embody cultural narratives, stories passed down from generation to generation. This investigation into place, culture and spiritual life she believes is, "fundamental to know who you are, where you have come from and where you belong". (Colour Theory with Richard Bell - No Coincidence Media, NITV 2014, SBS). She is a younger generation artist, articulate and mindful of her position in our society now and in relation to history. She says, "I think a lot about my grandmother…she was denied a voice, she wasn't able to speak language or practice culture, so it's my responsibility to tell these stories, but most importantly to celebrate all the wonderful things about our culture" (http://artstartgrant.com.au/VideoSTVDIO ArtStart: Lucy Simpson). Her fabrics are testimony to her personal philosophy, conveying subtle messages about culture, place and belonging, valued as contemporary art/design.

Ceretha Skinner is a Gumbayngirr woman from Grafton, NSW who has lived in Canberra, for 15 years, producing printed fabrics from her own designs and cultural perspective. In 2013 she became Craft ACT: Craft and Design Centre's first Indigenous artist-in-residence for a three week period at Gudgenby Ready-Cut Cottage in Namadgi National Park followed by a period of research and development at the National Museum of Australia. The resulting exhibition at Craft ACT presented the work from the residency. Skinner used her camera to record through photography and made pencil and pen drawings which developed into strong graphic croquis executed with surety and confidence of line, shape and composition. Rock images from observation of forms in the Gudgenby River were drawn with black marker pen and then re-drawn many times in an effort to put their particular character in the design.

Repetition of graceful line drawings of dragonflies conjures up their flight patterns. Working steadily day by day, there was a growing sense of return to an understanding of the land. Skinner said that she would wake up feeling full of knowledge as spirits were coming and walking her over the country and telling her about it, teaching her respect for the sacred ground. There was so much to digest in a short time. The residency awakened a deep understanding of land and heritage. It brought to the fore issues of identity as people move from place to place and they have to negotiate new relationships. Aboriginal culture is constantly evolving and dynamic and Ceretha Skinner by her care of nature and the spiritual world is keeping her culture alive in her fabrics. She values her culture and this message is apparent in her work.

Indigenous printed fabrics embody images that reflect culture through the artists' hand drawn designs for print or carvings in lino. They are immediate and accessible in their representations creating a new visual language running parallel to other well-established art forms.

4. New Directions and Success

The future of Indigenous fabric printing in Australia is one full of possibilities. As with any other new enterprises there are aspects that bring together artists in different ways. We examine the directions and successes that apply to Australia through fabric forums, fashion, painting and art.

4.1 Fabric Forums

Travelling with Yarns held at Injalak Arts and Crafts was unique in that it took place on Aboriginal land in the heart of the Stone Country, Gunbalanya, Northern Territory of Australia. Indigenous artists and experts in textiles, fashion, art and technology travelled to the remote location to discuss vital issues. It has been discussed earlier.

Selling Yarns 3: Weaving the nation's story, 2013 was a four-day event that presented a conference, a market day, workshops, an exhibition and associated activities program, building on the 2 previous events. It is the premier national forum for Indigenous textile and fibre in Australia. The 2013 event had a focus on printed textiles both in speakers and in the market day.

Ufla Upla (pronounced Youfela Youpela) was the title of the National Indigenous Textiles Forum held in Cairns 2013. It focused on printed/painted textiles and fashion bringing artists, facilitators and industry representatives together to define the future of the Australian Indigenous textiles sector. The forum began with fast paced presentations giving insights into issues and concerns, highlighting new developments and exploring the social and cultural values of the textiles. Lucy Simpson and Fabia Pryor talked about how textiles can change lives through Aboriginal owned, sustainable and culturally appropriate businesses.

Figure 6 – Models wearing digitally printed fabrics at the Ufla Upla Fashion Show. Cairns, 2013. Photo: L. Hamby

4.2 Fabric and Fashion

Although Indigenous printed fabrics have been used to make fashion clothing since the 1970s there are new initiatives influencing developments in this area. With the global economic downturn and concerns about sweatshop labour, many people are questioning the fast turnover of low cost fashion garments. There is concern for the environment and sustainability with customers looking for ethical/ local production and connection to people and their stories.

Small business Raw Cloth in Darwin ticks all the boxes and has a cult following. They hand make a limited range of vintage inspired garments in limited production printed fabrics such as Marimekko, Indonesian batiks, antique and aboriginal fabrics. Merrepen Arts and Tiwi fabrics are popular for one-off "infused couture" outfits that stand out by their originality and ability to bypass fashion trends.

In 2011 the inaugural Black Heat fashion workshop was held as part of the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF) bringing together a range of industry professionals, designers and Indigenous creators to brainstorm and develop a plan to cultivate this emerging industry. Arts Queensland also provided support for a workshop during CIAF 2012 on possible issues for the Indigenous artists participating in an Indigenous Fashion Project later in the year (Ayers, 2013).

At the Travelling with Yarns Forum, Gunbalanya, NT 2012, fashion was a topic of interest. Fashion designer and lecturer Adriana Dent talked about ways to value add by communities

making garments and other items from the printed fabric. She also talked about her own couture business making evening and bridal unique wearable pieces of art with Aboriginal prints on silk. Waltraud Reiner, a milliner for 30 years, presented new experimental prints on sinamay and heavy felt with prototype hats, accessories and laptop bags. Artist and designer, Linda Jackson, who has worked with aboriginal fabrics and fashion since 1979 commented on how in the late 1970s and 80s they thought that aboriginal fabrics and fashion would take off, but only now, 30 years later it seemed to be happening (Association of Northern Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists, 2013, pp. 56–58). During the concurrent Stone Country Festival, the print room was open to visitors and school groups to learn about fabric printing and sewing. Then at the evening concert brilliant coloured fabrics became the stage set for the bands. There was an air of excitement and pride around the textiles.
The following year at Selling Yarns 3 (2013) an Indigenous fashion parade featuring artists from Canberra and the South Coast Region was arranged by Renee Smith in the central courtyard of the National Museum of Australia. This signaled growing interest in presenting Aboriginal fashion. In the forum Julie Appo, fashion designer, talked about her difficulties in trying to run a business from a remote area with the fickle and demanding market for products in the big cities and tourists only wanting to buy garments in traditional aboriginal colours (red, black and yellow) with dot paintings on them. Vibrant fashion performances heralded things to come– trans-seasonal garments, colour and texture, alternatives to the mainstream, new technologies with hand-crafting and reflections of Australia's Indigenous culture. The outlook was extremely positive, embracing printed fabric with potential initiatives and collaborations leading to diverse outcomes in fashion, product, interior design and Fine Art.

This year, Australian Indigenous Fashion Week 2014 was a new and unique initiative that built on the previous forums and events. It was created to provide a national platform to bring together the diverse range of talent in the industry and to forge a bridge between old perceptions of Aboriginal culture and dress and bold new directions in contemporary fashion. Writer Larissa Behrendt stated that "Australian Indigenous cultures have a rich craft custom from which modern fashion can draw, and a new generation of designers have referenced the possum coats, emu feathers, shell jewellery and weaving that were an intrinsic part of Aboriginal culture" (Behrendt, 2014). To this the contemporary fashion designers added striking printed textiles, painted silks and digital designs. The event moved public perceptions of Australian Indigenous fashion from small production in remote areas to ground-breaking runway collections.

Riding on a wave of interest in Indigenous textiles and fashion, Merrepen Arts Festival 2014, launched Ngan'giwetimbi Dememarrgu Old Stories New Ways, a cultural performance featuring their contemporary textiles that have created a stir across Australia over the past two years with music and dance. The festival art sale where visitors could buy the screen printed Merrepen fabrics at community prices was also a great success (Merrepen Arts, 2014).

Meanwhile on the remote Darnley Island, in the North East of the Torres Strait, the new label "Ailan Pasin" (Island Fashion) is emerging. The Erub Erwer Meta Arts community had discussed the need for a label that was appropriate for islander lifestyle and could also sell nationally and internationally to mainstream customers. They had a seven year history of printing fabric and T-shirts, making skirts and learning new skills through workshops. They wanted to reinterpret the traditional loose and flowing islander dress to make it suitable for locals as well as the other customers. A collaboration with Indigenous fashion designer Grace

Lillian Lee and two volunteers enabled the production of a capsule range which was shown in Sydney and Cairns. Lynette Griffiths, consultant with Erub, concluded , "Ailan Pasin feels comfortable moving forward with Indigenous design, created with meaning for those interested in wearing art, story, and sharing culture across borders. To share their ideas and unique island culture with the world, to do this they are happy to work with others in a respectful collaborative (Griffiths, 2014))

Most recently a new fashion performance: UFLA YUMPLA (YOU FELLA YOU PEOPLE) was held at the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair 2014. It brought together the distinctive talents of tropical north Australian Indigenous designers and textile artists. The rising stars showcased their talent in a unique infusion of Indigenous culture, texture, colour, pattern, form and movement. Ufla Yumpla created a new dialogue between artists, performers and the public and a platform for creative and meaningful alternatives to mainstream fashion (Cairns Indigenous Art Fair, 2014).

There has never been such energy and excitement around Indigenous fashion in Australia before. The trend parallels rising interest in Maori fashion in NZ with Miromoda – The Indigenous Māori Fashion Apparel Board (IMFAB) founded in December 2008, (Indigenous Maori Fashion Apparel Board, 2014) and Dr. Jessica R. Metcalfe commenting on the Santa Fe Indian Market 2014, "Typically, the fashion events are held on the outskirts of SWAIA's sanctioned booths, but this year we happily see them showcased at the center" ("Beyond Buckskin," 2014)

4.3 From Painting to Fabric

A slightly different aspect of Indigenous fabric printing comes from collaborations between Indigenous artists who are painters and have no experience with fabric printing or design and design businesses. We examine two artists Sarrita King and Regina Wilson. Sarrita King is an Indigenous artist known for her paintings that reflect her sense of cultural pride and totemic landscapes. In 2014 she participated in a fashion and jewellery collaboration organised by the Australian Department of the Exterior boutique clothing store and Bilk Gallery in Canberra. King's painting "Fire" was digitally printed onto 100% silk in Sydney and incorporated into the Winter 2014 collection of Edition fashion label. King worked with the fashion designer Alice Sutton. Their aim was to create wearables that were beautiful while considering the environment and future of the fashion industry. The styling was classic, emphasising zero waste practice and longevity in garments (Department of the Exterior & Bilk, 2014).

Another Aboriginal painter who has recently been involved in fabrics is Regina Wilson. She is from the Peppimenarti Community in the Daly River region of the Northern Territory. Wilson has also been involved in the production of fibre art including baskets at Durrmu Arts Centre. Her collaboration was with Koskela, an Australian company that retails to the interior design market and has as its motto 'Every KOSKELA piece is designed by us & made in Australia by one of our select partners'(Koskela, 2014). Co-owner Sasha Titchkosky and her husband Russell Koskela met Wilson and Durrmu Arts coordinator Harriet Fesq at the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair in 2009. Wilson knew of Koskela through their previous collaboration producing lampshades with Elcho Island Arts and wanted to work with Titchkosky (Hamby, 2010).

I saw those lights from Elcho Island, and they were really good. Sasha from Koskela asked us if we wanted to do fabric design. My paintings would make good fabric design. For the Ngan'gikurunggurr durrmu means designs – designs that can be anywhere. (Koskela, 2013) Wilson completed three designs based on items of material culture from her area and included a fish net (Syaw), a string bag (Wargardi), and a traditional message stick. Titchkosky worked through different ways of reproducing the art works in a repeat fabric. "In the end we started working with specialised digital printers because they could reproduce her work down to the last brushstroke' says Titchkosky(Burge, n.d.)". For their business Koskela decided to have these fabrics made into finished products for interiors rather than selling the fabric as meterage.

4.4 Fabric as Art

Examining a recent national event in Darwin points towards what can happen in the area when artists are given support and encouragement for their work. This year, 2014, was the 31st year for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA) also known as the Telstra Award due to its major sponsorship by the telecommunications company Telstra. The event was established in 1984 as the National Aboriginal Art Award by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory by the curator of Indigenous Art, Margie West. 'There were very few community art centres, for instance, even in the NT. And I didn't want to make it solely an event for the North; I wanted to show the NT art coming from the cities of the South as well. You could call it a democratic ethic – and that breadth's been maintained in our uncurated surveys ever since' (Eccles, 2007). The aim of the Award is to recognise the contribution made by Indigenous artists and to promote appreciation and understanding of their work. This has been matched by prize money; the top prize jumped from $40,000 to $50,000 AUD. There are also five categories with $5,000 each including: General Painting, Bark Painting, Three-Dimensional, Works on Paper and for the first time this year The Youth Award. There is no category specifically designed for textiles or printing on fabric. For the first time in the NATSIAA history a printed fabric has won an award in the Youth category on August 8, 2014. This year it went to Kieren Kulingmirr Pumut McTaggart for a print called Yerrgi, which means pandanus. Kieren has previously painted pandanus and other fibre subjects in acrylic on canvas and had a one man show at Nomad ("Karritypul," 2014).

As the following description from Keiren demonstrates he has a strong desire to connect his cultural heritage to his work on fabric and painting.

I have grown up watching my grandmother, mother and aunties all collect yerrgi (pandanus) for weaving of baskets and mats. We search for many different plants, roots and berries which we use to dye the yerrgi to create beautiful colours. The yerrgi is bunched as it is in my painting after the dyeing process and ready to use by the women for weaving. The inspiration for my painting has come from the many bundles of yerrgi I watched being made by my mother and grandmother as a young child. This was always a time when my elders would pass on old stories and teach me important knowledge about my Aboriginal culture. My love of painting and textile design comes from being able to tell really old stories passed down to me from my elders and telling these stories in a whole new way by placing these on textiles and paintings. ("Karritypul," 2014)

The success of Yerrgi, has not happened in isolation. It was a collaborative effort between Keiren, his art centre Merrepen Arts and his collaborator Bobbie Ruben. Ruben has been working with Merrepen Arts since 2012 helping to develop the artist's technical skills and an understanding of the qualities that make a successful fabric design. The Yerrgi print was developed during a workshop conducted by Ruben in January 2014. The popularity of the fabric has positive and negative flow on issues for the artist and Merrepen Arts and highlights some of the issues discussed in this paper. The desire for the authentic hand-made product which brings kudos versus the desire for economic benefit which means either the fabric becomes very expensive or the printing has to be outsourced and no longer printed by Aboriginal hands. As Keiren says 'Merrepen can't keep up with the demand for the fabric.' ("Telstra Art Award (National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award)," 2014).

Figure 7 – Yerrgi, print by Keiren Kulingmirr Pumut McTaggart at NATSIAA, Darwin. 2014. Photo: L. Hamby

Indigenous fabric printing in Australia has a short history but is now attracting public attention through the dynamic designs, creative approaches and exclusive qualities of the work. Individual artists and Art Centres are struggling to keep up with the demand for their product and at the same time they are facing increased financial pressures. This has led to experimentation with out-sourcing hand printing, digital fabric printing and relationships with commercial enterprises. The new fabrics that are not printed by Aboriginal hands have brought about a re-evaluation of what constitutes an authentic Aboriginal product and a renewed appreciation of the hand made and its particular qualities. The most recent success in the art arena is a possible indication of one way forward for Indigenous fabric printing in Australia.

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